

"There's good news in the mail!": Women's studies by external mode of delivery

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Introduction

Women's Studies subjects have been offered in tertiary institutions in Australia since the early 1970s and available to a wider range of students through distance education from the middle of that decade. The 1980s, however, have given rise to the development and provision of fully external Women's Studies degree courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Nationally a full complement of such courses are now available:

Women's Studies degree courses available through Distance Education, Australia 1991	
Pre-tertiary	
"Women Returning to Study" module, NOW programme	TAFE, South Australia
Under Graduate Programmes	
Bachelor of Arts	Deakin
(Available through the Interuniversity Exchange)	Murdoch
	Queensland
4th Year Programmes	
Diploma in Women's Studies	Murdoch
Bachelor of Literature	Deakin
Honours in Women's Studies	Murdoch
Postgraduate Degree Programmes	
Diploma in Women's Studies	University of New England
Graduate Diploma in Arts	Adelaide
Master of Arts	Adelaide
Master of Education/Master of Arts	University of New England

Individual subjects in women's studies are available in the external mode as part of other degree courses. For example, Edith Cowan University offers several units in its BA (Social Science) as do UNE and Monash Gippsland. Flinders University will soon offer an external M. Sc. (Primary Health Care) which will include several subjects relating to women's health from a feminist perspective.

The Women's Studies courses are appropriate for a wide range of students but they have been of particular benefit to women returning to study as mature-entry learners. The external courses allow women to study at home in their own time. They are taken by rural and isolated students but also by students in metropolitan areas with dependent children or other adults in their care. Women in the paid workforce who wish to fit their study commitments into evenings, weekends or holiday break periods also find external study attractive.

These programmes are available at a variety of entry points - from the bridging module offered through TAFE through to the Master's Degree - and have attracted interest and rising enrolments throughout the decade of the 1980s.

The Programmes

The programmes themselves cater to a broad spectrum of student interests. They include both interdisciplinary subjects with a focus on theory, methods and/or practices (as in: feminist theory, feminist criticism, feminist research strategies, discourse analysis, female sexuality, women and work, popular culture, semiotics, gender and modernity, personal and professional development and the like) and discipline-based studies which adapt feminist perspectives within a particular field of study (for example: education, the law, sociology, anthropology, psychology, English literature, history, politics, family studies, management, health sciences, and the like). The range of offerings provide the opportunity for students to increase their knowledge and understanding of feminist approaches across the disciplines, and to consider feminist theories and research methodologies relevant to their personal and professional needs.

What follows is a brief description of a selection of the courses which are presently available at pre-tertiary, undergraduate and postgraduate level followed by a discussion of perceived problems and opportunities for the future.

TAFE: "Women Returning to Study" module

TAFE in South Australia offers two Women's Studies programmes to internal students: the NOW (New Opportunities for Women) programme¹ and the Women's Studies Certificate. Only one subject, "Women Returning to Study", taught in both programmes, is presently available by external mode to students in South Australia. It offers valuable personal support and skills training to mature entry women wishing to take up tertiary study at TAFE. The TAFE Women's Studies certificate can be used by internal students as a prerequisite to the Associate Diploma courses, and from them into BA programmes, in several South Australian universities (in lieu of matriculation or Mature Entry exams). The Curriculum Branch of TAFE is considering the possibility of extending the Women's Studies certificate to external mode delivery as well as exploring options for extending the availability of the "Women Returning to Study" module. Developments on each of these fronts, which is essentially a matter of shifting present funding and resource priorities, would significantly increase access for non-matriculant mature entry women into a variety of tertiary programmes.

Undergraduate Degrees: The Interuniversity Exchange

The interuniversity exchange of external women's studies subjects is arguably one of Australia's most successful examples of inter-institutional collaboration in distance education. Operating between Deakin, Murdoch and Queensland Universities, it has enabled each institution to offer a full undergraduate degree course in Women's Studies through the selective crediting of external subjects offered by each of the participating institutions. The idea was first conceived in August 1981 when Robyn Rowland (Deakin) and Frances Rowland (Murdoch) met at the Wollongong Women's Studies conference. At that time both Murdoch and Queensland universities offered Women's Studies subjects in the external mode, but neither institution had sufficient to establish a full degree course. Staff at Deakin University had had their attempts to establish Women's Studies units thoroughly frustrated and saw the proposal to exchange external subjects as the

political lever which would finally achieve the breakthrough they needed.

Following their meeting in August 1981, discussion with staff at each institution indicated considerable enthusiasm for the proposal and a subsequent meeting of interested academics and administrative staff was held at Deakin in 1982 to draw up a firm proposal. Approaches were made to the Directors of the three External Studies Units and relevant senior administrators. The Directors subsequently met and their discussions established the framework which enabled external subjects from Murdoch University to be made available to students from Deakin and Queensland Universities from first semester, 1983. By 1984, Deakin had developed its own first-year subject enabling it, and Queensland University, to approve undergraduate degree courses in Women's Studies. Murdoch followed suit in 1985, having had to develop further Women's Studies subjects to meet its own degree regulations.²

The Women's Studies initiative also led the External Studies Directors to examine the possibility of broader co-operation between external providers. This culminated, in July 1983, with the Toowoomba Accord: an agreement between the 5 Australian universities then offering distance education, to cross-credit their external subjects as elective units. In more recent years it has been erroneously assumed that the Women's Studies exchange is part of the Toowoomba Accord. The distinction between the two examples of interuniversity co-operation is not simply historical: Unlike the "smorgasbord" model of the Toowoomba Accord, the Women's Studies co-operation is based on a structured exchange of core and elective subjects leading to full degree courses.

Structure

Cooperation between the three institutions was greatly facilitated by each institution having a similar model of a 4 course load/full-time semester and similar approaches to distance education (for example, none of the institutions had residency requirements for their external students). Nonetheless, each institution in the exchange has its own degree regulations and practices and, for this reason, the Women's Studies course structures at the three universities differ. Queensland, for example, offers the course in the external mode only, whereas at both Deakin and Murdoch internal students have access to the degree through mixed mode arrangements. Deakin differentiates between subjects taken in the second and third years, Murdoch and Queensland do not. Murdoch's degree regulations require more subjects in a major sequence (10 compared to 8) and its degree structure allows greater flexibility in elective choice, thus it developed more offerings to contribute to the exchange (8 subjects compared to 4 each from Queensland and Deakin). Finally, course production at the three institutions remains distinctive and gives students a variety of models in distance provision. For example, Deakin produces subject books with structured reading programmes which operate for a 5 year period before being rewritten, whereas Murdoch tends to update its subjects each year using lecture tapes from the previous year's internal subject with associated study guides and course readers.

Not all subjects are available to all students: The idea behind the exchange was that each institution should select from the pool of available subjects an integrated sequence which met their individual degree requirements. All three institutions require their students to take their own and at least one other first year subject. Deakin and Murdoch, unlike Queensland, then require students to take certain core subjects and a number of additional electives. Murdoch and Queensland cross credit nearly all the courses in the exchange pool, Deakin is more selective (because of its more highly structured 2 first year subjects, 2 second year and 4 third year sequence).

The differences between the three institutions, and the spirit of co-operation in which the venture was undertaken, have imparted their own demands on the exchange. Academically, it was agreed that the development of new subjects at any of the three institutions would not duplicate or compete with existing units but fill in the gaps in the collective offerings. Thus, when Queensland moved to develop a first-year unit it chose a topic not covered in

detail by the other two existing first-year subjects. Similarly, there is considerable consultation to ensure that courses are properly sequenced and that students are well-informed on the content and advised of the level of difficulty of any subject in the exchange.

Administrative structures responsible for managing the degree courses and co-ordinating the exchange are also not identical across the three institutions. The inevitable problems of devising new procedures, and of adapting them as student demand increased, has required the close co-operation of academic and administrative staff. Lines of communication between administrative and academic staff across the three institutions have been identified, and in particular, the three academic co-ordinators have had to work closely together to ensure the exchange operates smoothly and to resolve specific problems as they arise. For example, the three co-ordinators communicate regularly about matters as varied as the annual planning exercises at each institution, and the problems of individual students.

A number of administrative principles were set in place. Each institution admits students to their own degree course in accordance with their usual admission requirements. The enrolment of students in cross-institutional subjects is handled through their "home" institution which provide each "host" institution with all enrolment details by specified dates. Similarly grades for each cross-enrolled student were collated by each host institution and a list provided to the home institution at the conclusion of each semester. Because the grading systems varied at the three institutions, student transcripts at the home institution recorded an ungraded pass/fail, with students receiving a separate transcript from their host institution indicating their actual subject grade. In all other respects the student acts as a student of the host institution for the duration of the course: they receive course materials from the host institution, utilise the bookshop and library of that institution and submit assignments to academic staff at the host institution.

Initially a quota system was agreed to in order to ensure a balance was kept in the numbers of student exchanged between the institutions, but the increase in student demand has resulted in the quotas being lifted. This has introduced some inequities into the exchange, in particular, Murdoch garners the greater share of enrolments simply by virtue of the number of subjects it offers. To counteract this the Murdoch course requires its students to take at least three subjects at the other institutions.

Student Populations

The majority of students taking the Women's Studies course at each of the three institutions are mature-aged women studying part-time and externally. Nonetheless, as the CTEC Evaluation of the exchange (1987: 31-34) noted, a significant number fall outside this pattern. In particular, as enrolment in the inter-institutional subjects are no longer strictly limited to students enrolled in the full degree course, more diverse enrolment patterns are becoming evident.

Course enrolments at the three institutions remain healthy (Murdoch, for example, consistently averaged between 90 and 100 course enrolments once the degree was fully established). Many of these are students picking up a double major. While interest has been growing, and the numbers of applications for admission increasing steadily, institutional constraints on new enrolments, combined with an increasing institutional and DEET emphasis on school-leaver and full-time admissions, has kept the admission figures at some of the institutions constant over the past few years.

Problems and Future

The initial idea of collaboration fitted well with the ethos of Women's Studies as an interdisciplinary/traus-disciplinary subject and as a collaborative exercise. It also fitted well with the approach of the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, which at that time was advocating co-operation between external providers and a rationalisation of offerings. Paradoxically, and subsequent to both the establishment of the Toowoomba Accord and then the Dawkins reform of higher education, this emphasis on rationalisation has worked counter to the interests of the inter-university exchange. The broader context changed from one of

co-operation to an ethic of competition in the provision of external degrees, which means the co-operative spirit of the exchange has to be maintained against pressures in the opposite direction. In addition, relationships between the Toowoomba Accord and the exchange became increasingly uneasy as decisions which had a direct impact on the administration of the exchange were taken through the Accord structure without adequate consultation with the interuniversity exchange steering committee. The members of the interuniversity exchange viewed the development of the Toowoomba Accord with a degree of cynicism since it had developed out of their initiative, but had taken precedence over them. For example, each of the three institutions funds attendance at the annual Toowoomba Accord meeting but not to the annual meeting of the Women's Studies exchange steering committee. The co-ordinators of the exchange have managed to meet only by virtue of all attending the same conference or utilising some other business trip.

This process of external interference in the operations of the exchange has been exacerbated by the establishment of the Distance Education Centres. Not only has the reduction of external providers to a few DEC's had a direct impact, but the decisions taken at DEC and NDEC levels increasingly threaten the operation of the exchange. For example, Queensland University may no longer be able to fully participate in the exchange, having failed to become a DEC in the restructured unified system.³ Other initiatives taken by individual DEC's or being discussed at NDEC - eg, the possibility of fees being charged for cross-institutional enrolments, or the likelihood of there being only one Distance Education provider after the next round - will directly effect the success of the unique collaborative venture.

Postgraduate Degree Programmes: Adelaide University and the University of New England

A Graduate Diploma and Masters Degree in Women's Studies is presently available through the University of Adelaide. The courses were developed by staff from the former South Australian CAE (City Campus) which merged with the University in 1990. The external Graduate Diploma was introduced in 1985; the Master's programme was introduced in 1990. The Graduate Diploma is available to students with a three year diploma or degree; the Master's to students with an Honours degree or a Graduate Diploma in Women's Studies. At the University of New England the requirement for admission to the Women's Studies Diploma is a university degree or equivalent.

Structure

In 1979 the SACAE (now the University of Adelaide) introduced the Graduate Diploma in Women's Studies by Internal mode. External delivery was introduced in 1985. Two core subjects were available in the first year and two additional subjects were introduced each year until the full complement of subjects became available in 1990. The University of Adelaide Graduate Diploma is a one year full-time or two to three year part-time course consisting of two core interdisciplinary subjects and four elective subjects chosen from a field of ten options. The core subjects include feminist theory and either personal and professional development or a survey of feminist theories and practices in the public sector. The electives allow students to develop an awareness of feminist approaches within the discipline areas of history, English, education, sociology and health as well as interdisciplinary studies of women in popular culture, women from non-English speaking backgrounds, female sexuality, and semiotics. There are no residency requirements although students are invited to attend two weekend residential workshops over the life of the course.

The Diploma offered by the University of New England was first introduced in 1989 as a one year full-time or two to three year part-time programme, with residency requirements. It consists of seven subjects, two core, three options and a two subject credit point equivalent thesis. The core subjects have been developed by staff at the UNE and focus on feminist theory and methodology and sociology of education. Students may choose electives from

six subjects available through UNE in the areas of education, economic and population history, linguistics, language and sociology of the family, or other subjects offered externally by the Deakin, Murdoch, Queensland undergraduate inter-university exchange or others approved by the Co-ordinating Committee.

The University of Adelaide offers an external Master's Degree in Women's Studies. The pre-requisite for entry is a Division I or IIa Honours degree or Graduate Diploma in Women's Studies passed at Credit level. The course consists of two core subjects one on feminist research strategies and one on contemporary debates within feminism, either one or three elective subjects (chosen from the range of subjects also available at the Graduate Diploma level), and a thesis with the weighting of either two or four subjects.

The subjects developed externally by staff presently employed at the University of Adelaide include subject information booklets, study guides and readers, as well as audio and video tapes. The study guides tend to be lengthy, interactive and personalised which, along with the choice of assessment options, have been geared to meet a range of personal and professional needs of students. Students are also sent a geographical listing of other students enrolled in the subject in their area. Telecommunication conferences are a feature of many of the subjects as well. The teleconferences frequently provide the impetus for students to make personal contact with others in their area and to establish learning networks. These local interactions are further enhanced by visits from the lecturers to geographical areas with a concentration of students.

Student Populations

As with the inter-university undergraduate exchange, the students in these programmes tend to be mature-aged students studying part-time and externally. However, most are employed full-time in professional career areas. A majority of students are teachers, social workers, nurses or public servants. A significant minority work in women's areas (Women's Community Health Centres, Family Planning, Women's Shelters, Rape Crisis Centres, Women's Advisor's Office, Equal Opportunity Commission officers, women's theatre groups, and the like). At the University of Adelaide quotas for the combined Graduate Diploma and Master's programme are presently set at 40 equivalent full-time students, which means that approximately 100 students are enrolled in the programmes each year, half of whom are internal and the other half external. The University of New England has about 30 students in the Diploma of Women's Studies. All students in the programme are external.

Course evaluation: why do students do Women's Studies?

In 1986 the former SACAE conducted a survey of students who had been enrolled in the Graduate Diploma of Women's Studies both internally and externally. 280 surveys were mailed out. 118 students responded to the survey. All but two students responded that a primary goal for enrolling in the course had been: to satisfy a personal interest in the Women's Studies area; all but seven responded: to expand my knowledge of feminist theory and practice. The next most often ticked responses were: to apply feminist perspectives to my professional areas of responsibility; to better understand myself; for my own professional development and to share personal and professional concerns with other women. However, one third of the respondents reported that positive and unexpected changes had occurred in their professional employment and/or competence as a result of being involved in the course.

When asked to comment on the relevance of the award to their professional life students indicated that the course had provided them with personal empowerment ("all the time!", one wrote), vocational enrichment, self-confidence (specifically in the areas of conducting and being the subject of interviews, job application skills, and decision making skills) and improved personal and management styles. Students wrote that through the course they had developed valuable networks and social contacts. In addition, the course had enabled them to become involved in curriculum development at primary and secondary levels of education, to

adapt their teaching styles and methods, to develop affirmative action policies and practices at TAFE, to raise awareness about women's issues with colleagues, to engage in public advocacy on behalf of women, and to represent equity issues within the public service generally.

Students specifically responded that the course had provided them with a knowledge of industrial issues, better understanding of women in society, a keen awareness of girls' needs in the classroom, a better understanding of women's work related issues (ie. dual career problems, childcare needs), and non-traditional educational opportunities. Several wrote that it had a direct relevance to their research responsibilities or led to the writing and publication of articles, fiction and/or poetry.

Students also listed specific projects carried out as a result of their involvement in the course. These included: the organisation of a women's conference; conducting creative writing workshops in the community and awareness workshops on: sexual harassment, women and violence, women and sport. In addition, students engaged in developing equal opportunity policies in schools, developing a Women's Studies curriculum at TAFE and writing successful submissions for research grant applications (eg. child sexual abuse research and training for teachers, domestic violence research and training for health professionals, research on women writers and women musicians which led to the production of a series of radio programmes on women and the arts), public musical performances, and writing a book (in fact at least six students have had creative works published which were begun in Women's Studies creative writing subjects).

Overall, students responded that the course offered a stimulating programme of studies with helpful and considerate staff which had increased their self-confidence; enabled them to clarify and achieve career goals; assisted in the production of non-sexist policies and practices within education and the public service sector; made students aware of gender issues in the workplace; encouraged them to develop and maintain women's networks and take on a range of personal and professional projects designed to extend and improve the personal, social, political and economic status of women and girls. Clearly, on the postgraduate level, Women's Studies offers a vital and valuable programme of study to a variety of professional adult learners. And it has had a significant impact on the wider community.

Problems and future

In South Australia the merger of higher degree institutions has unfortunately resulted in the separation of several external programmes, including Women's Studies, from the institution in which the Distance Education Centre is located. It has also resulted in the separation of staff involved in the teaching of Women's Studies course awards into three newly constituted institutions, one of which does not offer a degree course in Women's Studies. In relation to the first problem, the University of Adelaide has had no recent experience in the provision of external programmes. It has, however, accepted a commitment to continue to provide external programmes of study previously offered by the City Campus of the former SACAE. Negotiations are presently underway to establish a new set of guidelines and a contract with the DEC centre at the new University of South Australia to provide for the production and distribution of materials in the future. But it is a new arena for the University requiring close liaison between academics and administrators involved in the programme. In relation to the second concern, staff hope to develop a new Women's Studies programme at the graduate level at the newly formed University of South Australia. Should this occur it will ensure that the original plan to offer a cross-institutional Master's degree across all three South Australian universities, which utilises the limited but valuable staff expertise and resources of all three institutions, is not lost due to the split of campuses belonging to the former SACAE. In both of these areas, however, the merger was regressive in terms of Women's Studies growth and development, at least in the short term.

Another concern in relation to the graduate programmes has been the priority given by universities to research rather than

coursework degrees and by DEET to increasing the number of women in non-traditional areas, even at postgraduate level. These national and institutional directions run counter to the needs and desires of women to return to coursework rather than research programmes of study. In addition, they mediate against the development of social and political collaborative efforts and effects which flow from the involvement of professional women in postgraduate Women's Studies awards.

Future Developments

Despite, and indeed because of, the uncertainties of the national scene, a meeting of external providers of Women's Studies courses and subjects was held in Adelaide in April 1991.⁴ As the National External Women's Studies Providers Consortium, this group hopes to explore the possibility of broadening the level of co-operation amongst institutions involved with, or interested in, the external provision of Women's Studies. At the April meeting a number of issues were canvassed in regard to Women's Studies provision including: cross-institutional and cross-crediting arrangements between contributing institutions; the exchange of resources amongst Women's Studies staff across the country; increased access to external Women's Studies subjects by students in all institutions; and the sharing of supervisory and assessment responsibilities for external students, particularly for thesis students working at higher degree levels. Groundwork has been laid for further inter-institutional co-operation at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. A list of all external Women's Studies courses is being compiled to assist in cross-crediting arrangements, and discussion will be continued throughout 1991-92 aimed at extending existing collaborative ventures.

References:

- Pam Maclean "Universities Combine to Teach Women's Studies," *Open Learning*, 1:1 (1986).
- CTEC Evaluations and Investigations Program, *The Interuniversity Women's Studies Major: Evaluation of a model of inter-institutional collaboration in Australian Distance Education* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1987).
- Women's Studies Course Team, Course Evaluation, *Submission for the Re-accreditation of the Graduate Diploma in Arts (Women's Studies)*. Adelaide: South Australian College of Advanced Education, Sept., 1986.

Endnotes

1. The New Opportunities for Women (NOW) Programme is widely available throughout the TAFE system in Australia. Several states are taking initiatives similar to South Australia in providing additional Women's Studies subjects. The Western Australian TAFE, for example, is developing several courses in a Social Studies certificate which it also hopes to make available externally in the near future.
2. Subsequently Murdoch has repackaged its undergraduate courses to offer a one-year full-time (or equivalent part-time) external Diploma in Women's Studies and an external Honours in Women's Studies. Deakin has developed a 4th year B.Litt programme in Women's Studies and is interested in developing a coursework Masters in collaboration with Adelaide and UNE.
3. Queensland is now planning to introduce an internal Women's Studies major, and, in the event that special arrangements cannot be made with DEET, will have to phase out its external offering from the end of 1993.
4. The meeting was attended by representatives of all the institutions currently offering external Women's Studies courses (Adelaide, Deakin, Murdoch, Queensland, UNE), together with representatives of Monash/Gippsland who offer external Women's Studies subjects but are interested in developing a course sequence, and a representative of Swinburne which is interested in making its Diploma in Equal Opportunity Administration available externally.